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Early in my career I crafted an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History that was to explore the role and history of American slavery. I traveled throughout the American south searching for an extant slave cabin that I could use in the exhibition. Ultimately, I found a cabin on the old Friendfield Plantation that was located in the rice producing area of the Wacamaw Neck near Georgetown, South Carolina. After driving past an array of swamps, I came to a "slave street," an area that contained twelve slave cabins and a small church. There I met Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was the grandson of a slave who had resided in one of these cabins from the 1850s until her death in the 1930s. Mr. Johnson talked about how the slaves did a "hard sweep" that eliminated the grass and weeds that were the home to vermin. And then we walked to the side where the chimney was located and he spoke about the role that slave children played in maintaining the chimneys to prevent fires. And then we moved to the rear of the cabin where he explained how slaves used that space to grow food crops that supplemented the food that was provided by the owners. Finally, I walked to the fourth side but Mr. Johnson did not follow me. After repeatedly asking him to accompany me, I demanded to know why he left me alone on that side of the cabin. Finally he looked at me and said that he would not move in my direction because the area "was full of poisonous snakes." After I stopped running, I asked why he did not warn me. He said that everyone around here knows the history of that spot. And then he said "people need to remember not just what they want, but

what they need. It pains the ancestors when we forget." His words—"people need to remember"—have never left me.

Ultimately, Mr. Johnson called for people to remember not simply out of nostalgia but because history—especially African American history—provides useful tools and lessons that help one navigate contemporary life. The best museum presentations can help people find that meaningful and useable past. Yet not everyone believes that this nation should remember, and especially when these memories include and are fundamentally shaped by African American history and culture.

The notion that African American history has limited meaning should be a concern for all Americans. We would be better served if we remember the words that James Baldwin wrote in his novel, The Fire Next Time:

> "History does not refer merely or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and that history is literally present in all that we do."

So in this statement, I want to explore why the interpretation and preservation of African American History and Culture in museums are so important and relevant for an America still struggling with the legacy and impact of race. And what are the challenges that museums face as they struggle to help the people to remember a fuller, richer, and more complex history.

You can tell a great deal about a country or a people by what they deem important enough to remember; what they build monuments to celebrate; and what graces the walls of their museums. Throughout Scandinavia there are monuments and museums that cherish the Vikings as a proud symbol of Nordic curiosity, exploration, and freedom. In Scotland, much is made of the heroic struggles of William Wallace to throw off the yoke of British

domination. Until recently, South Africa was dominated by monuments and memories of the Vortrekker, while the United States traditionally revels in Civil War battles or founding fathers, with an occasional president thrown into the mix.

Yet I would argue that we learn even more about a country by what it chooses to forget. This desire to omit—to forget disappointments, moments of evil, and great missteps—is both natural and instructive. It is often the essence of African American culture that is forgotten or downplayed. And yet, it is also the African American experience that is a clarion call to remember.

A good example of this nexus of race and memory is one of the last great unmentionables of public discourse about American history—the story of slavery. For nearly 250 years, slavery not only existed but was one of the most dominant forces in American life. Political clout and economic fortune depended upon the labor of slaves. Almost every aspect of American life—from business to religion, from culture to commerce, from foreign policy to western expansion was informed and shaped by the experience of slavery. American slavery was so dominant globally that 90 percent of the world's cotton was produced by slaves in the American South. By 1860 the monetary value of slaves outweighed all the money invested in this country's railroads, banking, and industry combined. And the most devastating war in American history was fought over the issue of slavery.

And yet few institutions address this history for a non-scholarly audience. And there are even fewer opportunities to discuss—candidly and openly—the impact, legacy, and contemporary meaning of slavery.

I remember a small survey from the early 1990s that assessed the public's knowledge about slavery. The results were fascinating: 81 percent of white respondents felt that slavery was

a history that had little to do with them; 73 percent felt that slavery was an important story but that its real relevance was only to African Americans. Even more troubling was the fact that the majority of African Americans surveyed expressed either little interest or some level of embarrassment about slavery.

There is a great need to help Americans understand that the history of slavery matters because so much of our complex and troubling struggle to find racial equality has been shaped by slavery. And until we use the past to better understand the contemporary resonance of slavery, we will never get to the heart of one of the central dilemmas in American life—race relations. But it is also important for those who preserve and interpret African American life to help combat the notion of embarrassment. I am not ashamed of my slave ancestors, I am in awe of their ability—in spite of the cruelties of slavery—to maintain their culture, their sense of family, their humor and their humanity. I wish more people knew the words of William Prescott, a former slave who when asked about slavery by a WPA interviewer in the 1930s said, "They will remember that we were sold but not that we were strong; they will remember that we were bought but not that we were brave."

There is a great need and opportunity to draw inspiration, sustenance, and guidance from African American culture. And from this inspiration, people can find tools and paths to help them live their lives. As America continues its internal debates about who we are as a nation and what our core values are, where better to look than through the lens of African American history and culture. If one wants to understand the notion of American resilience, optimism, or spirituality, where better than the black experience. If one wants to explore the limits of the American dream, where better than by examining the Gordian knot of race relations. If one wants to understand the impact and tensions that accompany the changing demographics of our

cities, where better than the literature and music of the African American community. African American culture has the power and the complexity needed to illuminate all the dark corners of American life, and the power to illuminate all the possibility and ambiguities of American life. One of the challenges before us, whether we write, preserve, exhibit history or consume culture, is to do a better job of centralizing race.

A final reason why African American history and culture are still so vital, so relevant, and so important is because the black past is a wonderful but unforgiving mirror that reminds us of America's ideals and promises. It is a mirror that makes those who are often invisible, more visible, and it gives voice to many who are often overlooked. It is a mirror that challenges us to be better and to work to make our community and country better. But it is also a mirror that allows us to see our commonalities. It is a mirror that allows us to celebrate and to revel but also demands that we all struggle, that we all continue to "fight the good fight."

So the question before us is how have museums done and what are the challenges that they face today? When all else fails, historians can always rely on a quotation from W.E.B. DuBois. His oft quoted line that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line, is quite appropriately applied to the state of museums in the 21st century.

One of the key challenges that cultural institutions face is how to effectively wrestle with and cross the color line. If museums are to truly be institutions that the public admires and trusts, then more should expend the political and cultural capital, take the risks, to help their visitors find a useful, usable, inclusive, and meaningful history that engages us all.

Gone are the days when cultural institutions could argue that there was little public interest in illuminating the slave presence in America. No longer are museums silent about slavery.

Just look at the recent wonderful array of scholarship and interpretation produced by museums and historic sites. Plantations like Monticello, which once never uttered the word "slave," now support innovative research on Mulberry Row - the site of cabins and homes of the enslaved, that has, along with the story of Sally Hemmings, reshaped the interpretation of Jefferson's home. Many of the significant plantations from Drayton Hall to Mt. Vernon have rethought the place of slavery within their institutions. And Somerset Plantation in North Carolina, with its privileging of the experience of the enslaved, is a beacon of what is possible. The work at Somerset demonstrates the transformative power of history when the past is made meaningful and useful to contemporary audiences. The pioneering work of Rex Ellis at Colonial Williamsburg has brought the interpretation of slavery to the world of living history. Now millions of visitors to Williamsburg begin to see a re-created world that more closely approximates the tensions and racial dynamics of 18th Century Virginia.

And the array of museum exhibitions that explored the slave past has been impressive - if not staggering. Most southern state museums have developed interesting collections and dedicated exhibition space that illuminates the history of the "peculiar institution". And an array of exhibitions has introduced untold audiences to the issues surrounding slavery. Unlikely institutions like the Valentine Museum - whose innovative work in the late 1900's and 1990's raised the visibility of the history of urban slavery. The Museum of the Confederacy brought together an impressive array of scholars to produce "Before Freedom Came." At the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, two permanent exhibitions explore slavery in the 18th century Chesapeake and the role of enslaved and free blacks in low country South Carolina. The Library of Congress mounted "Behind the Big House" while the Mariner's Museum in Newport News imported the important Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Exhibition from

Liverpool. All these exhibitions and many others that I did not mention seemingly demonstrate that slavery is no longer the last great unmentionable in American museums. The silence, the deafening silence, that once greet the visitors who sought to better understand the slave past, has been replaced by a fleeting cacophony of exhibition and interpretive vehicles.

And there are exciting possibilities on the horizon. There are serious discussions and attempts to create museums of slavery in Charleston, S.C. and one effort led by the former Governor of Virginia, Doug Wilder that would be located in Fredericksburg, VA. And the Smithsonian is creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I think that one of the most intriguing installations is the Underground Railroad Museum and Freedom Center. Under Spencer Crew's leadership, this institution should provide new insights into the history of race in America, but it also has the potential to give its audience tools to find a useful and useable history that can inform their daily lives. Thus the future of the interpretation of slavery in museums and historic sites seems bright.

Clearly the world of museums and historic sites is undergoing important change. Clearly there is increased visibility and awareness of the need to explore slavery in America's cultural institutions. Clearly slavery can no longer be ignored. But I would suggest not enough museums and historic sites have embraced the need and the challenge of interpreting the slave past. Too many historic sites view the discussion of slavery as a necessary evil. Something that is now required but still not central to their institutional mission. And too few museums have dedicated the space, expended the intellectual and scholarly capital, and made the public commitment to explore slavery in a way that is comprehensive, accessible, and able to grapple with both the historical legacy and contemporary meaning of slavery. And even where the change is drastic and even in institutions that have crafted many of the exhibitions that I have mentioned, there is

the need to transcend this "first generation" of interpreting slavery. Even the best of these exhibitions struggle to simply acknowledge and introduce the public to slavery. I would suggest that the time for simple acknowledgement is past.

And why is this so important? Because museums are one of the important sources of historical knowledge. Recent surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that Americans are still ambivalent at best, but often hostile to discussions about slavery. There is a lack of understanding about the history, meaning, and contemporary resonance of slavery. Museums and historic sites have an important role to play if they are able to transcend this simple acknowledgement of the slave past.

There is an array of recent scholarship that examines the dynamic and fluid nature of the institution of slavery. Scholarship that helps us better understand that slavery was not static. And that chronological and regional considerations contributed to a very diverse and changing institution. Yet rarely do museums capture more than a frozen moment. This static nature of museum interpretation also limits the public's understanding of the interdependencies and interrelationships that were essential to slavery. Few exhibitions explore the interconnectivity among free blacks and the enslaved. Yet it is clear that people married, worked, collaborated, and disagreed across boundaries. This would allow the public to experience more of the diversity and dynamic nature of the slave experience. We have all heard the phrase, "think globally and act locally." Well I would suggest that America's museums and historical sites always think locally and act locally when it comes to the interpretation of slavery. With the exception of a map depicting the triangular trade routes or an illustration of slave ships, American museums rarely grapple with the international or global dimensions of slavery. Slavery is a wonderful lens to explore broad, global issues of race, identity, trade, power, and commerce. But it is a lens that

is closed to most American visitors. What better subject than slavery to help Americans rethink their place and their role in a global economy. What better subject than slavery to allow Americans to break down the parochialisms that shape our lives daily. More importantly, it is difficult to understand the origins, evolution, and legacy of slavery unless one sees the international dimensions.

But this tendency to look inward also limits the American museum's ability to benefit from some of the important work on slavery that is occurring throughout the globe. While there have been great changes in whom and what museums interpret, it is much too soon to be satisfied with the American museum profession's efforts in exploring African American culture. Often the rhetoric of change fails to match the realities of every day life in museums. My major concern is that museums are too often crafting exhibitions that simply say that "African Americans were here too," rather than examining the complexities, interactions and difficulties of race in America. In essence, much of what institutions create today is better suited to the world of forty years ago - when blacks, in the words of Novelist Ralph Ellison, "were invisible men and women, " and whites needed to be reminded that African American history and culture mattered - rather than the presentations for the 21st century that need to better reflect the clashes, compromises, broken alliances, failed expectations and contested terrain that shape the perspectives of today's audiences.

Despite two decades of substantive progress and change, whiteness is still the gold standard in museums. While there have been many exhibitions and many moments to celebrate, I am not convinced that these exhibitions have as far reaching and as permanent an impact as one might believe. While many of these presentations introduced newer, more diverse audiences to cultural institutions, the relationships are not often nurtured or sustained. And often museums

"check off" the African American exhibition and return to business as usual once the exhibition has closed. And business as usual is celebrating whiteness.

So, in closing, it is important to acknowledge that African American culture has a permanent home in America's museum, but there is still much to do to reach the promised land. Let me close with a quotation from a former slave, Cornelius Holmes, who said in 1939: "Though the slavery question is settled, its impact is not. The Question will be with us always. It is in our politics, in our courts, on our highways, in our manner and in our thoughts—all the day—every day."

What a gift it will be when museums help the public understand that they are shaped and touched by African American history—all the day, every day.